

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA
ANDERSON/GREENWOOD DIVISION

Dannie Nichols, III,) C/A No.: 8:11-877-JFA-JDA
)
Plaintiff,) **REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**
) **OF MAGISTRATE JUDGE**
vs.)
)
Dr. Yates,)
)
Defendant.)
)

This matter is before the Court on Defendant's motion for summary judgment.

[Doc. 31.] Plaintiff, a prisoner proceeding pro se, brought this civil rights action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. [Doc. 1.] Pursuant to the provisions of Title 28, United States Code, Section 636(b)(1)(B), and Local Rule 73.02(B)(2)(d), D.S.C., this magistrate judge is authorized to review all pretrial matters in cases filed under Title 42, United States Code, Section 1983, and submit findings and recommendations to the District Court.

Plaintiff's Complaint was filed on April 15, 2011, generally alleging claims of medical malpractice and pain and suffering. [Doc. 1.] Defendant filed a motion for summary judgment on August 23, 2011. [Doc. 31.] Pursuant to *Roseboro v. Garrison*, 528 F.2d 309 (4th Cir. 1975), Plaintiff was advised of the summary judgment and dismissal procedures and the possible consequences if he failed to respond adequately to Defendant's motion. [Doc. 32.] Plaintiff filed a timely response on September 26, 2011. [Doc. 37.] Accordingly, Defendant's motion is now ripe for review.

BACKGROUND

At all times relevant to this action, Plaintiff was a pretrial detainee at the Alvin S. Glenn Detention Center ("ASGDC"). [Doc. 1 at 2.] Plaintiff alleges he broke his hand

and wrist in October of 2009. [*Id.* at 3.] An x-ray was taken, which revealed a fracture to the distal fourth and fifth metacarpal. [*Id.*; see also Doc. 31-2 at 13.] Plaintiff alleges Defendant told him it was a severe fracture and that he would need to see a specialist. [Doc. 1 at 3; see also Doc. 31-2 at 15.] According to Plaintiff, he was never taken to a specialist and his hand has now healed improperly. [Doc. 1 at 5.] Plaintiff alleges he has severe pain in his hand most of the time and he cannot use his pinky or ring fingers. [*Id.*] He brings this suit for pain and suffering and medical malpractice “[b]ecause the doctor did not provide [him] with the best available treatment for [his] hand.” [*Id.*]

APPLICABLE LAW

Liberal Construction of Pro Se Complaint

Plaintiff brought this action pro se, which requires the Court to liberally construe his pleadings. *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976); *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972); *Loe v. Armistead*, 582 F.2d 1291, 1295 (4th Cir. 1978); *Gordon v. Leeke*, 574 F.2d 1147, 1151 (4th Cir. 1978). Pro se pleadings are held to a less stringent standard than those drafted by attorneys. *Haines*, 404 U.S. at 520. Even under this less stringent standard, however, the pro se complaint is still subject to summary dismissal. *Id.* at 520–21. The mandated liberal construction means only that if the court can reasonably read the pleadings to state a valid claim on which the petitioner could prevail, it should do so. *Barnett v. Hargett*, 174 F.3d 1128, 1133 (10th Cir. 1999). A court may not construct the plaintiff’s legal arguments for him. *Small v. Endicott*, 998 F.2d 411, 417–18 (7th Cir. 1993). Nor should a court “conjure up questions never squarely presented.” *Beaudett v. City of Hampton*, 775 F.2d 1274, 1278 (4th Cir. 1985).

Requirements for a Cause of Action Under § 1983

Section 1983 provides a private cause of action for plaintiffs alleging constitutional violations by persons acting under color of state law. Section 1983 provides, in relevant part,

[e]very person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State . . . subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or any person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law, suit in equity, or other proper proceeding for redress .

...

42 U.S.C. § 1983. To establish a claim under § 1983, a plaintiff must prove two elements: (1) that the defendant “deprived [him] of a right secured by the Constitution and laws of the United States” and (2) that the defendant “deprived [him] of this constitutional right under color of [State] statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage.” *Mentavlos v. Anderson*, 249 F.3d 301, 310 (4th Cir. 2001) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted).

The under-color-of-state-law element, which is equivalent to the “state action” requirement under the Fourteenth Amendment,

reflects judicial recognition of the fact that most rights secured by the Constitution are protected only against infringement by governments. This fundamental limitation on the scope of constitutional guarantees preserves an area of individual freedom by limiting the reach of federal law and avoids imposing on the State, its agencies or officials, responsibility for conduct for which they cannot fairly be blamed.

Id. at 310 (quoting *Dowe v. Total Action Against Poverty in Roanoke Valley*, 145 F.3d 653, 658 (4th Cir. 1998)) (internal citations and quotation marks omitted). Nevertheless, “the deed of an ostensibly private organization or individual” may at times be treated “as if a State has caused it to be performed.” *Brentwood Acad. v. Tenn. Secondary Sch. Athletic Ass’n*, 531 U.S. 288, 295 (2001). Specifically, “state action may be found if, though only if, there is such a ‘close nexus between the State and the challenged action’ that seemingly private behavior ‘may be fairly treated as that of the State itself.’” *Id.* (quoting *Jackson v. Metro. Edison Co.*, 419 U.S. 345, 351 (1974)). State action requires both an alleged constitutional deprivation “caused by the exercise of some right or privilege created by the State or by a rule of conduct imposed by the State or by a person for whom the State is responsible,” and that “the party charged with the deprivation must be a person who may fairly be said to be a state actor.” *Lugar v. Edmondson Oil Co.*, 457 U.S. 922, 937 (1982). A determination of whether a private party’s allegedly unconstitutional conduct is fairly attributable to the State requires the court to “begin[] by identifying ‘the specific conduct of which the plaintiff complains.’” *Am. Mfrs. Mut. Ins. Co. v. Sullivan*, 526 U.S. 40, 51 (quoting *Blum v. Yaretsky*, 457 U.S. 991, 1004 (1982)).

Summary Judgment Standard

Rule 56 states, as to a party who has moved for summary judgment:

The court shall grant summary judgment if the movant shows that there is no genuine dispute as to any material fact and the movant is entitled to judgment as a matter of law.

Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(a). A fact is “material” if proof of its existence or non-existence would affect disposition of the case under applicable law. *Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc.*, 477 U.S. 242, 248 (1986). An issue of material fact is “genuine” if the evidence offered is such that a reasonable jury might return a verdict for the non-movant. *Id.* at 257. When determining whether a genuine issue has been raised, the court must construe all inferences and ambiguities against the movant and in favor of the non-moving party. *United States v. Diebold, Inc.*, 369 U.S. 654, 655 (1962).

The party seeking summary judgment shoulders the initial burden of demonstrating to the court that there is no genuine issue of material fact. *Celotex Corp. v. Catrett*, 477 U.S. 317, 323 (1986). Once the movant has made this threshold demonstration, the non-moving party, to survive the motion for summary judgment, may not rest on the allegations averred in his pleadings. *Id.* at 324. Rather, the non-moving party must demonstrate specific, material facts exist that give rise to a genuine issue. *Id.* Under this standard, the existence of a mere scintilla of evidence in support of the non-movant’s position is insufficient to withstand the summary judgment motion. *Anderson*, 477 U.S. at 252. Likewise, conclusory allegations or denials, without more, are insufficient to preclude granting the summary judgment motion. *Ross v. Commc’ns Satellite Corp.*, 759 F.2d 355, 365 (4th Cir.1985), *overruled on other grounds*, 490 U.S. 228 (1989). “Only disputes over facts that might affect the outcome of the suit under the governing law will properly preclude the entry of summary judgment. Factual disputes that are irrelevant or unnecessary will not be counted.” *Anderson*, 477 U.S. at 248. Further, Rule 56 provides in pertinent part:

A party asserting that a fact cannot be or is genuinely disputed must support the assertion by:

- (A) citing to particular parts of materials in the record, including depositions, documents, electronically stored information, affidavits or declarations, stipulations (including those made for purposes of the motion only), admissions, interrogatory answers, or other materials; or
- (B) showing that the materials cited do not establish the absence or presence of a genuine dispute, or that an adverse party cannot produce admissible evidence to support the fact.

Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(c)(1). Accordingly, when Rule 56(c) has shifted the burden of proof to the non-movant, he must produce existence of a factual dispute on every element essential to his action that he bears the burden of adducing at a trial on the merits.

DISCUSSION

Pretrial Detainees' Constitutional Rights

Because Plaintiff's claims arose when he was a pretrial detainee, his claims are analyzed through the lens of the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. “[A] pretrial detainee, not yet found guilty of any crime, may not be subjected to punishment of any description.” *Hill v. Nicodemus*, 979 F.2d 987, 991 (4th Cir. 1992). “[P]retrial detainees are entitled to at least the same protection under the Fourteenth Amendment as are convicted prisoners under the Eighth Amendment.” *Young v. City of Mount Ranier*, 238 F.3d 567, 575 (4th Cir. 2001) (citing *City of Revere v. Mass. Gen. Hosp.*, 463 U.S. 239, 243–44 (1983); *Hill*, 979 F.2d at 991–92). Therefore, the

standards applied in Eighth Amendment conditions of confinement cases are essentially the same as those in cases arising under the Fourteenth Amendment. See *Hill*, 979 F.2d at 991; *Martin v. Gentile*, 849 F.2d 863, 871 (4th Cir. 1988) (citing *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97 (1976)).

Although prisoners retain many constitutional rights, it has been recognized that incarceration inherently limits certain constitutional rights of prisoners. *O'Lone v. Estate of Shabazz*, 482 U.S. 342, 348 (1987). The United States Supreme Court has held prison officials have a duty under the Eighth Amendment and county detention centers have a duty under the Fourteenth Amendment to provide humane conditions of confinement: they must ensure adequate food, clothing, shelter and medical care, and must take reasonable measures to guarantee the safety of inmates. *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. 825, 832 (1994).

Deliberate Indifference to Serious Medical Needs

Plaintiff claims Defendant's acts or omissions in treating his hand fracture violated his constitutional rights. In the case of *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97 (1976), the Supreme Court reviewed the Eighth Amendment prohibition of punishments which "involve the unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain." *Id.* (quoting *Gregg v. Georgia*, 428 U.S. 153, 169–73 (1976)). The Court stated:

An inmate must rely on prison authorities to treat his medical needs; if the authorities fail to do so, those needs will not be met. . . . We therefore conclude that deliberate indifference to serious medical needs of a prisoner constitutes the "unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain," proscribed by the Eighth Amendment. This is true whether the indifference is manifested by prison doctors in

their response to the prisoner's needs or by prison guards in intentionally denying or delaying access to medical care or intentionally interfering with the treatment once prescribed.

Id. at 103–05 (citations and footnotes omitted). Despite finding that “deliberate indifference to serious medical needs” was unconstitutional, the Court was careful to note “an inadvertent failure to provide adequate medical care” does not meet the standard necessary to allege an Eighth Amendment violation:

[A] complaint that a physician has been negligent in diagnosing or treating a medical condition does not state a valid claim of medical mistreatment under the Eighth Amendment. Medical malpractice does not become a constitutional violation merely because the victim is a prisoner. In order to state a cognizable claim, a prisoner must allege acts or omissions sufficiently harmful to evidence deliberate indifference to serious medical needs.

Id. at 107.

The Fourth Circuit has also considered this issue in the case of *Miltier v. Beorn*, 896 F.2d 848 (4th Cir. 1990). In that case, the court noted that, to violate a prisoner’s rights, the treatment “must be so grossly incompetent, inadequate or excessive as to shock the conscience or to be intolerable to fundamental fairness, . . . nevertheless, mere negligence or malpractice does not violate the Eighth Amendment.” *Id.* at 851 (citations omitted). Unless medical needs were serious or life threatening, and the defendant was deliberately and intentionally indifferent to those needs of which he was aware at the time, the plaintiff may not prevail. *Estelle*, 429 U.S. at 102–103; *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. 825 (1994); *Sosebee v. Murphy*, 797 F.2d 179 (4th Cir. 1986).

Although the Constitution requires that prisoners be provided with a certain minimum level of medical treatment, it does not guarantee to a prisoner the treatment of his choice. *Thomas v. Anderson City Jail*, No. 6:10-3270-RMG-KFM, 2011 WL 442053, at *3 (D.S.C. Jan. 19, 2011); *Jackson v. Fair*, 846 F. 2d 811, 817 (1st Cir. 1988). While the provision of medical care by prison officials is not discretionary, the type and amount of medical care is discretionary. See *Brown v. Thompson*, 868 F. Supp. 326 (S.D. Ga. 1994). Further, a disagreement as to the proper treatment to be received does not in and of itself state a constitutional violation. See *Smart v. Villar*, 547 F. 2d 112 (10th Cir. 1976); *Lamb v. Maschner*, 633 F. Supp. 351, 353 (D. Kan. 1986).

Here, Plaintiff alleges Defendant is liable for medical malpractice because he failed to properly set Plaintiff's fractured hand and wrist and failed to send him to a specialist for treatment. [Doc. 1.] However, Defendant has submitted evidence of the extensive medical care Plaintiff received at ASGDC.

On October 12, 2009, Plaintiff was seen in medical for reportedly punching a wall while in court when a judge denied him a bond on his state charges. [Doc. 31-2 at 6.] The nurse noted the right hand was swelling and Plaintiff reported an old "boxer fracture" to his right hand. [*Id.*] The nurse wrapped and taped the right hand for comfort and instructed Plaintiff to keep his hand elevated. [*Id.*] On October 15, 2009, Defendant prescribed Plaintiff Motrin for swelling and pain and ordered an orthopedic consult. [*Id.* at 20.] X-rays were taken and read by Dr. John Bayard, who found fractures of the distal fourth and fifth metacarpals with soft tissue swelling. [*Id.* at 13.]

Plaintiff was seen in medical on November 4, 2009, for follow-up with his mental health medication and again on November 19, 2009, when his right hand was once

again evaluated by medical, which noted it was healing well. [*Id.* at 122, 6.] From November 19, 2009 through May 4, 2011, Plaintiff was either seen by Correct Care Solutions medical staff, Mental Health, or a third party physician nearly every month, sometimes numerous times per month, for various complaints concerning ear infections, outside eye examinations, and medication issues. [*Id.* at 5, 17; see also 27–29, 31 (documenting Plaintiff's refusal of treatment).]

On June 7, 2011, nearly two years after his hand injury from punching a courtroom wall, and for the first time since October 2009, Plaintiff presented to medical to complain of pain in his right hand. [Doc. 31-2 at 17.] Due to those complaints, Defendant again ordered an x-ray, which was read by Dr. Alan B. Kantsiper. [*Id.* at 128.] Dr. Kantsiper's findings were as follows: "Healed Fracture sites of the distal fourth and fifth metacarpal demonstrated with the distal aspect noted to be in slight volar angulation. Chronic changes are noted at the base of the fifth metacarpal as well. No obvious fracture sites are noted." [*Id.*]

Based on these undisputed facts, Plaintiff's treatment was not grossly incompetent, inadequate or excessive, such that it shocks the conscience or is intolerable to fundamental fairness. At all times, Plaintiff was given access to medical staff at the ASGDC as evidenced by the medical records. Although it appears Defendant ordered an orthopedic consult that apparently never came to fruition, there is no evidence Plaintiff complained about his hand or requested an outside consultation until June 7, 2011. Additionally, the June 7, 2011 x-ray revealed no new fractures, but satisfactory healing of the known fourth and fifth metacarpal fractures. Plaintiff's allegations, when combined with the undisputed medical records, do not rise to the level

of constituting deliberate indifference to his serious medical needs. Additionally, although Plaintiff repeatedly alleges Defendant committed medical malpractice, mere negligence is not actionable under § 1983.¹ Therefore, it is recommended that Defendant's motion for summary judgment be granted.

RECOMMENDATION

Wherefore, based upon the foregoing, the Court recommends Defendants' motion for summary judgment be GRANTED.

IT IS SO RECOMMENDED.

s/Jacquelyn D. Austin
United States Magistrate Judge

February 24, 2012
Greenville, South Carolina

**The parties are directed to note the important information in the attached
“Notice of Right to File Objections to Report and Recommendation.”**

¹ To the extent Plaintiff is attempting to set forth a state law claim for medical malpractice, he has not established that jurisdiction is proper in this Court. Additionally, Plaintiff has failed to proffer expert testimony that Defendant deviated from the standard of care. See S.C. Code Ann. § 15-36-100.

Notice of Right to File Objections to Report and Recommendation

The parties are advised that they may file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation with the District Judge. Objections must specifically identify the portions of the Report and Recommendation to which objections are made and the basis for such objections. “[I]n the absence of a timely filed objection, a district court need not conduct a de novo review, but instead must ‘only satisfy itself that there is no clear error on the face of the record in order to accept the recommendation.’” *Diamond v. Colonial Life & Acc. Ins. Co.*, 416 F.3d 310 (4th Cir. 2005) (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 72 advisory committee’s note).

Specific written objections must be filed within fourteen (14) days of the date of service of this Report and Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b); *see* Fed. R. Civ. P. 6(a), (d). Filing by mail pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 5 may be accomplished by mailing objections to:

Larry W. Propes, Clerk
United States District Court
901 Richland Street
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Failure to timely file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation will result in waiver of the right to appeal from a judgment of the District Court based upon such Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140 (1985); *Wright v. Collins*, 766 F.2d 841 (4th Cir. 1985); *United States v. Schronce*, 727 F.2d 91 (4th Cir. 1984).